SEEDS, PLANTED
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Psalm 92: 1-4, 12-15
Mark 4: 26-34

"The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground . . . like mustard seed . . . the smallest of all the seeds" Mark 4: 26, 31 (NRSV)

If we want to speak of heavenly things we may begin by speaking about earthly things, and if we want to describe that which is beyond all words, we may begin with words we know such as: man, woman, field, seed, bird, air, bread, sea, fish, joy . . . The kingdom is like these things: the kingdom is found in these things . . .If we cannot find the kingdom here we will never find it anywhere, for earth is where the seeds of heaven are sown.

Barbara Brown Taylor
The Seeds of Heaven

Your presence in the world, O God, is quiet, subtle, but steady, like the warmth of the sun, the gentle power of wind, the secret germination of a seed. So give us eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts open to experience your love, your kingdom on earth — in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

I've been thinking about seed planted a lot recently. I had the unique privilege, last weekend, of visiting with three men who had a profound impact on my life: two college professors and a Dean who planted seeds which, for better or worse, took root and grew and continue, in a manner of speaking, to bear a little fruit. The occasion was a class reunion marking graduation, 50 years ago, from Franklin & Marshall, a small, liberal arts college in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. I did what you do at reunions: reminisced and laughed with close friends and their spouses, some of whom have been life-long friends and some of whom I hadn't seen for five decades.

On Saturday afternoon, after the requisite luncheon, induction into the 50 year club and the inevitable appeal for money, we attended an event called "The Adventures of the Class of '59" in a large classroom. Five of my classmates were to tell a little about their careers and accomplishments. I wasn't much interested, frankly. But then the first began, a doctor who I didn't know very well: as a student, Earl was quiet, focused, studious . . . . maybe I didn't know him very well because he was studying for four years.

He is a neurologist and is doing ground-breaking research into the causes of Alzheimer's disease, new methods of early detection and treatment. It was breathtaking. The second presentation was by one of my fraternity brothers, another quiet, studious, introspective classmate who earned a Ph.D. in inorganic chemistry and after working for the Oak Ridge National Laboratory and Union Carbide, returned to Michigan State to teach and do research. Jim's focus has been what causes tumors to grow and how to stop them from growing, so he does a lot of work in a lab with mice and he is the inventor of a highly acclaimed anti-tumor drug that is used in the treatment of cancer by oncologists everywhere. It was thrilling and I began to look around the room at my old classmates in a whole new light. What an unpromising group we were as freshmen: unsophisticated, naive, full of ourselves, and so young, still adolescents mostly. And what an interesting group we had become: physicians, business executives, attorneys, research chemists, college professors, clergy, and a White House assistant to President Ronald Reagan in charge of First Lady Nancy Reagan's office: each with a fascinating story to tell: each of us with a story to tell that began with a seed or two or three planted at that college fifty years ago.

Saturday evening I had the unique opportunity to visit with and thank three men — two professors and a dean — who had a profound impact on me and who, by happy coincidence, were guests at our class dinner. Wayne Glick, faculty advisor to our freshman dorm who showed up occasionally to chat and who ultimately became my advisor. He was a religion professor whose job was to pull the rug out from under our safe, unexamined, literalistic Sunday School religion and insist that we think: that religion belongs in the classroom, subject to critical analysis. Glick said that creation didn't happen in seven days. The Bible isn't a book of facts. God — if there is a God — is more mysterious and profound than our childish comfortable "man upstairs" ideas. It was shocking stuff. When I was forced to decide what to do after graduation and weighing options and trying hard not to be what used to be called a "pre-theological" student, Glick suggested I take a year and go to the University of Chicago Divinity School. "But, I don't want to be a minister," I objected. "That doesn't matter" Wayne Glick said. "The University of Chicago doesn't care what you do — but they'll make you think. And if it doesn't work out, there's always the Cubs." It was one of those conversations that turns out to be life changing. A tiny seed dropped into the ground. So, there I was, at dinner, sitting beside Wayne Glick — who went on to become a college and seminary president, and who now writes poetry: very good poetry which *The Christian Century* occasionally publishes.

John Vanderzell was a new government professor, just out of graduate school, not much older than his students. He was bright, funny, brought his big gray Weimeraner to class and joined in games of touch football. I was a government major and Vanderzell made political philosophy, Constitutional

law, the relationship between states' rights and federal authority come alive a few years after Brown v. the Board of Education and about the time President Eisenhower sent troops into Little Rock to protect African American children integrating the schools. He taught me to appreciate the incredible gift of our unique system of government, of the Constitution and Bill of Rights, at the very heart of our nation — a tiny seed, planted.

And Dean Richard Winters, a tall, lanky former minister whose tweed jackets, button down shirts and paisley ties made him look like a central casting college dean: gentle, tough and kind. When members of my fraternity left the house one evening and before long managed to break not only college regulations, but Pennsylvania State law, were caught, arrested and spent the night in jail — fortunately I was not among them, but part of the supporting cast — Dean Winters came to the house and told us that what happened could not and would not be tolerated and that the whole fraternity was on social probation for a semester, and if anything like that happened again we'd be shut down. It was 1957, Pennsylvania colleges had strict rules about alcohol on campus and underage drinking. And then, leaning on the fireplace mantel, he looked into the decorative vase — long ago, B.A.H. — "Before Animal House" — fraternity houses had living room furniture, pictures on the walls, a nice vase on the mantel — and to our horror, pulled out an empty beer can someone had deposited there. We thought it was all over. But he did the most amazing thing: he laughed. He said young men make mistakes. He said the mistakes don't need to be the end. He said smart young men learn from their mistakes. Although I didn't know the words at the time it was a moment of grace, forgiveness, redemption, reconciliation. A small seed, planted. He is 87, still tall and lanky and he told me he waits for *The Christian Century* to see what I have to say.

Late Sunday, on the plane back to Chicago, I pulled the file for Sunday, June 14 from my briefcase and ran my eyes over the texts for the day. Psalm 92:

"It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O most high."

I could certainly do that after the events of the prior two days. And then I read on down to the end of the Psalm:

"The righteous flourish like the palm tree . . . and grow like a cedar in Lebanon . . . In old age they still produce fruit: they are always green and full of sap . . ."

Now there's a concept with which to conclude a 50th college reunion. Age as growth, not decline: aging as a process of productivity, not diminishment, which is how we usually think about it, people in their 70s, still producing,

still green, still, as the Psalmist eloquently put it “full of sap:” energy, creativity, imagination and freedom and lots of love. One of my closest friends retired after a very successful business career and has started a not-for-profit leadership foundation in Delaware. Another builds houses for Habitat for Humanity and showed me the cuts and blisters on his hands to prove it.

Garrison Keillor’s column in the *Tribune* last Wednesday was about aging. Keillor is thinking about getting old a lot these days. He wrote:

“The world belongs to the young. Old pitchers get shelled one day and the next day are released. Old writers go fallow and that’s when people start giving them awards. Old politicians are locked up in think tanks. Old pop stars play casinos. We’re marching toward the cliff and the middle-aged are pushing us and the young are pushing them.”

Well, yes, true enough. But Keillor himself reflects an older, better wisdom . . . the old still flourish and bear fruit. Dean Winters and John Vanderzell do. Wayne Glick does, writing his beautiful poems — and right on schedule last week, former President George H. W. Bush jumped out of an airplane to celebrate his 85th birthday and is already planning to jump on his 90th.

And Mark 4, the other reading for June 14 — and finally we arrive at our text:

“The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise, night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.

“(The Kingdom of God) is like a mustard seed which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

Sometimes the stories Jesus told grab our attention because, although they are about ordinary people in ordinary situations: wedding guests, farmers building barns, planting seeds,
shepherds . . . their outcomes are occasionally counterintuitive, surprising. In one of his most familiar parables a good shepherd finds a lost sheep. But everyone knows that is not how it works. A responsible shepherd does not, in fact, leave 99 sheep alone in the wilderness to go looking for one who is lost. And this farmer, dropping seeds in the ground and then going home to sleep all day and night until harvest . . . everybody knows it doesn’t work like that. If you don’t weed, fertilize, loosen the dirt and water, your garden isn’t going to amount to much. There is truth in the old story about the man who prided himself on his beautiful, lush and obviously well-tended garden:

flowers — annuals and perennials, flowering bushes. One day while he was on his hands and knees — one of the benefits of gardening is that it forces you regularly to your knees — a neighbor passed by and complemented him on his garden. “Ah,” he said, “How good the Lord is to produce such wonderful growth.” “Yes” said the gardener, “but you should have seen the garden when God had it all to himself.”

Of course, someone has to plant the seeds, and then cultivate and weed and water. Gardening, farming, requires commitment, hard work, steady attention — a kind of deep and holy love. And it also includes — and this is Jesus’ point — a trust in the wonderful mystery of growth — about which the farmer, gardener, you and I, can do nothing but wait and watch and be astonished when it happens. Farmers and gardeners are consistently reverent before the awesome power in nature that causes things to grow and bear fruit. The Kingdom of God is like that, Jesus said.

When someone plants a seed, God’s Kingdom does come by God’s mysterious power, the power of love. It is not a bolt from the blue, a volcanic eruption . . . it is not — in spite of the apocalyptic rantings of the “Left Behind” mentality — a violent, vengeful cataclysm. It is like a seed dropped into the ground and growing and bearing fruit. It is like a young tutor, sitting quietly, week after week, with a student, doing math and grammar, and wondering if anything is happening. It is like a small loan of $100 to a woman in Mozambique from Opportunity International to buy a sewing machine to make clothes to sell and feed her children. It is like a group of American church people, building a house in Honduras, digging a well in Kenya, dispersing AIDS medication in Cameroon. It is like a group of Fourth Church members who tomorrow will travel to New Orleans to build a Habitat for Humanity house to honor the memory of Dana Ferguson on her birthday. It is like a Sunday School teacher patiently loving little ones, a Chicago Public School teacher who stays after hours to be with her junior high girls, a coach who will not give up on a gifted but lethargic linebacker, like a mother who sees more in her child than anyone else and will never give up on him . . . like a professor or dean. God’s kingdom on earth comes, Jesus said, when seeds are dropped onto the ground.

Sometimes, the seed which is planted in the human heart is of a dream — a dream of a better world, a dream of peace, and sometimes the seed is planted so well that it takes root and grows and stubbornly refuses to die even in the face of obstacles, hurdles, and what looks like overwhelming odds. Not only “Yes you can pass the test, make the team, graduate on time. Yes you can be a doctor, a lawyer, a homemaker. Yes you can succeed . . .” but also, “Yes there can be justice and kindness in our society and yes there can and one day will be peace.” The hidden coming of the Kingdom of God is about that, finally, I believe, the undying dream of peace — among neighbors, in our society, our nation, peace in the world.

It’s a pretty fragile dream, not unlike a tiny single seed and it must contend with seeds of hatred and bigotry and violence which also take root and grow and bear a terrible poisonous fruit. In the past few weeks in this nation there have been incidents of hatred and violence and murder which seem to make the dream of peace naïve, hopeless. In Wichita, a hate filled extremist walked into a Lutheran Church and killed a physician who was serving as an usher — who bravely continued to provide reproductive health services, including legal abortions to women who needed them. After years of harassment, threats, hate-filled speech — the rhetoric of anti abortion activists steadily escalating — “baby killer . . . mass murderer.” Bill O’Reilly called Dr. Tiller “Tiller the Baby Killer” and Dr. Tiller’s office a “Death Camp” on air 29 times — and amidst that violent rhetoric a man decided that to kill this doctor was not murder, but justifiable homicide. Dr. Tiller’s clinic is closed. Hatred, violence seem to have won. But the dream of a tolerant and open and just society where people can disagree and argue and contend with one another passionately, but live together, will not die.

Last week an anti-semitic bigot murdered a guard at the U.S. Holocaust Museum, inspired by hate speech and the most repulsive racism and violent white supremacist ideology. But the dream of a tolerant and open and inclusive and diverse nation will not die. The seed is in the ground and growing.

In the middle of it all, the Chancellor of Germany, the President of the United States, and a Nobel poet, author and concentration camp survivor stood in front of Buchenwald — a place that represents perhaps the most powerful intolerance and monstrous evil in all of history. And they, all three of them, spoke about the dream of peace.

President Obama remembered how Jewish adults at Buchenwald protected the children, hid the children — 900 of them, held illegal classes for the children, urged them to make plans for their futures, urged the children to think about the impossible, the dream of freedom and justice, a day when they could live and become and grow and bear fruit. A seed planted, right there in the foul soil of a concentration camp.

One of those children who did survive was standing beside the President, Elie Wiesel. He spoke slowly, deliberately — about his father who died in the bunk below his own. He spoke about the miracle of a Jew, standing beside the Chancellor of Germany in front of a concentration camp. And he spoke about the hope that the American President, “with a moral vision of history will (help) change the world into a better place, where people will stop waging war . . . every war is absurd . . . where people will stop hating . . . that the 21st century will be a century of new beginnings, filled with promise and infinite hope . . .”

Sometime, somewhere, someone planted a seed in your heart, dropped the seed of a dream of what you could be and do into the soil of your soul: a teacher, a coach, a college professor or dean, a parent.

Sometime, somewhere, someone planted a seed of what you might believe and do and give and love, a dream of a world better and more fair and just, a dream of a world more kind and compassionate . . . a seed of God's Kingdom on earth and your part in it.

"The Kingdom of God," we have it on good authority, "is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow . . .

"The Kingdom of God," Jesus said, "is like a mustard seed — the smallest of all seeds — which grows and becomes a great shrub and the birds nest in the shade of its branches."

Amen